THE PERSISTENCE OF CLASSICISM IN SCULPTURE

November 16, 1988-January 15, 1989
The Cleveland Museum of Art

The art of ancient Greece and Rome was never truly "lost" after the fall of the Roman Empire. An undercurrent of classical influence, evident in many different forms of art, can be traced through the Middle Ages.

But during the fifteenth century, a sustained and extended interest in antiquity was stimulated even further, preparing the groundwork for the continuous use of an ideal called *Classicism*. The Renaissance artist, in his desire to reproduce the world around him, studied classical sculpture to increase his understanding of how to render the human figure more perfectly; indeed, interpreting the natural world became synonymous with acquiring knowledge of classical works. Ancient Roman architecture and preserved antiquities, such as sarcophagi (coffins), had been uncovered and were available to artists for study and observation. In addition, collecting and displaying ancient art had become fashionable.

The growing curiosity about the ancient world was further stimulated by the translations and publications of classical literature in the 1460s and the 1470s, thus enabling the first serious studies of antique sculpture and the identification of the gods and heroes they represented.

Cover: Detail of *Terpsichore*. 68.212

The Wrath of Neptune, bronze, ca. 1540. Attributed to Tiziano Minio, Italian, ca. 1511-1552. Gift of Barrie Morrison, 74.273.

Philoctetes on Lemnos, marble. Attributed to Antonio Lombardo, Italian, ca. 1458-1516(?). Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 73.168.

Artists examined not only the style of these models but also the narrative content. Besides sculpture, small objects, such as engraved gems or coins, helped to revive interest in antiquity throughout Italy and, eventually, in other parts of Europe. In order to keep up with the increasing demand, artists copied existing sculptures, or they created new interpretations based on classical models. A revival of the ancient bronze-casting technique—the *cire perdue* ("lost wax") method—was one of the primary means used to produce sculptures.

By definition, however, the word *Classicism* means more than the careful imitation of antiquity. Rather, the term embraces fundamental principles derived from the art of Greece and Rome, including a rational and theoretical basis for producing the work of art, and an instructive intent. Classicism also embodies lasting, eternal values, equating beauty with order, symmetry, harmony, and proportion. A strong sense of tradition manifests itself in the repetition of certain themes.

The freedom to interpret from the ancient sources as a means to a more complete personal style was a choice made by many artists. Thus, Classicism did not always constitute complete submission to the model; artists were still selective in their choices of themes and details.

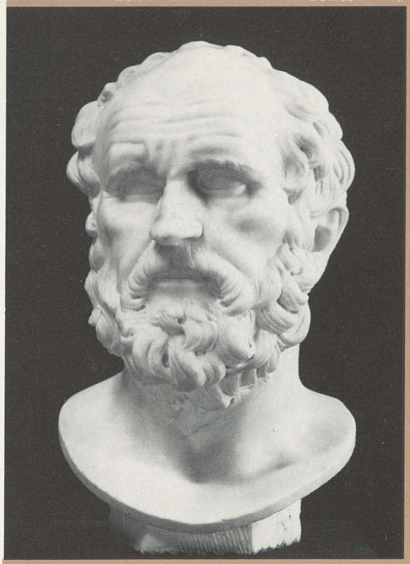
Standing Man, bronze, ca. 1500. Circle of Francesco di Giorgio, Italian, 1439-ca. 1501. John L. Severance Fund, 47.509.

Venus, bronze, ca. 1560. Danese Cattaneo, Italian, 1509-1573. John L. Severance Fund, 50.578.

During the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the desire to study and collect antiquities became widespread in Europe. Famous collections belonging to the papacy, wealthy Italian nobility, and several European kings stimulated other collectors, and made owning ancient sculptures quite prestigious. Because of this, copying antiquities became a lucrative business. Plaster casts were taken, and replicas were made in varying sizes, along with freehand copies.

As the Renaissance spread through Europe, artists flocked to Rome to study antiquities first hand, and many were employed by patrons to copy the originals (a practice that would continue through the nineteenth century). The finest talents sought to extract what they wanted and to blend these influences with the current style. Puget's *Head of a Philosopher*, for example, inspired by Hellenistic and Roman portrait-busts, exemplifies the restrained, naturalistic side of the Baroque in the seventeenth century.

Mythological subjects were often illustrated by artists. Images of the gods and heroes, assimilated into the humanistic ideas of the day, were particularly popular. One of the most enduring was the Greek hero Heracles (called Hercules by the Romans). His life and adventures were the subject of countless sculptures.



Head of a Philosopher, marble, 1662. Pierre Puget, French, 1620-1694. Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund, 69.121.

Nessus and Deianeira, bronze, ca. 1630-40. Francesco Fanelli, Italian, died 1665. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 75.31.

Unlike other pagan mythical figures, he did not fall into disfavor during the Middle Ages, largely due to the ethical connotations of his heroic struggles, as well as the fortitude and stamina he displayed. His battles against monsters were related to the concept of good versus evil, and his character was even associated with the Biblical hero Samson.

Heracles' most famous exploits were his twelve Labors–superhuman deeds that he performed while in the service of King Eurystheus. The hero was compelled to undertake these tasks because of the terrible crime he had committed–murdering his two children in a blind rage induced by the goddess Hera. Each Labor grew increasingly difficult. The final one was to carry the monster Cerberus up from the Underworld (thereby, at least in a symbolic sense, conquering death, as Christ did)–an act that gained Heracles a place on Mount Olympus, the abode of the gods. The battle against the Nemean lion (Heracles' first Labor, illustrated by two examples in the show) was a popular artistic subject. A particularly exciting version of another Labor, Heracles' battle with the Lernaean hydra (sometimes seen as a symbol of evil), was produced by the Netherlandish artist Adriaen de Vries, an important sculptor who blended classical elements with Northern European realism.

Hercules and the Hydra, bronze, ca. 1590. Attributed to Adriaen de Vries, Netherlandish, ca. 1560-1626. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 73.167.

The word *Classicism* conjures up images of gods, goddesses, and heroic stories. But the relevance of and the kinship between the sculptures in this exhibition lie in their appearance as well as in their underlying tradition, which was first felt in Italy by the fifteenth-century artists who strove to recreate nature by following the principles set down by the ancients. These ideals, although subjected to changing tastes and interpretations during the intervening centuries, were not forgotten.

Classicism has a place today in modern life and in art: the ideals expressed through the sculptures in this exhibition are as significant today as at the time they were created.

Prepared by Mark Deka, Department of Education

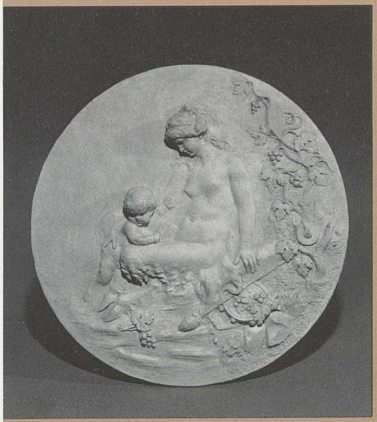
© 1988 The Cleveland Museum of Art

A Male Caryatid, bronze, 1913. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, American, 1876-1942. In memory of Ralph King. Gift of Mrs. Ralph King, 46.353.

Collecting bronze statuettes flourished during the seventeenth century, but an interest in sculptures done in other media also grew. Terra cotta had been used by sculptors in ancient times, and during the Renaissance it was employed as a less costly substitute for bronze. Sculptors in the seventeenth century also chose it for their *bozzetti*—clay sketches for larger sculptures. Because terra cotta permitted a more spontaneous treatment of a subject, many of these bozzetti retain all the artist's creative inspirations, as well as traces of his hands and tools, making them all the more desirable to collectors.

Certain artists in the eighteenth century specialized in terra-cotta sculptures that reflect the influences of antiquity. Although these examples often allude to an idyllic view of the classical past, they are clearly not dependent on ancient models. One such work, Clodion's charming terra-cotta relief, illustrates an ancient subject but is executed in the lighthearted and sensual rococo style.

Bozzetto: River God, terra cotta. Attributed to Giovanni Marchiori, Italian, 1696-1776. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 62.124.



Satyress and Child, terra cotta, 1803. Claude Michel (called Clodion), French, 1738-1814. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph King, 63.251.

During the eighteenth century, excavations of ruins (particularly at Pompeii and Herculaneum), the rediscovery of Greek temples in South Italy, and new publications greatly expanded knowledge about the Greek and Roman civilizations. For many, the meaning of what was truly "classical" was profoundly enhanced by the revelation of these new finds, and Rome's dependence on Greece was beginning to be recognized. Artists also looked back and studied the Renaissance and baroque interpretations of the classical world, providing a vocabulary of new forms and strengthening the flow of Classicism in their works.

One of the most deliberate revivals of antiquity in Western art since the early Renaissance occurred in what is called the Neoclassical period, beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century. The foremost sculptor of that era was the Italian Antonio Canova. Later in the century, as the French Revolution approached, the connotations of virtue and austerity derived from the art and literature of antiquity–especially that of the Roman Republic–appealed to French artists as well as to the revolutionary government. Under the subsequent Napoleonic rule, this interest expanded to include Roman Imperial monuments.

Terpsichore, marble, dated 1816. Antonio Canova, Italian, 1757-1822. Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Fund, 68.212.

By the mid-nineteenth century, earlier forms of Neoclassical style had dissolved into a spiritless, mechanical copying from the models, without consideration for the tradition or the principles of Classicism. Many artists, like Carrier-Belleuse, rebelled against this "academic" style, restoring to their work the narrative quality that had animated earlier sculptures. Carrier-Belleuse's bronze *Cupid and Psyche* (ca. 1870) is a work of great originality, combining the sensuous modeling of the baroque and rococo with a Neoclassical attention to the depiction of the furnishings inspired by antique models, such as Psyche's bed and lamp.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a change in attitudes. Many sought to make art "modern" by concentrating on the world around them. Some sculptors, however, like Rodin, continued to travel and to study the works of antiquity. Rodin's famous *Thinker* was inspired not only by the Belvedere *Torso*, a famous Greek antiquity, but also by the nudes sculpted and painted by the great Renaissance artist Michelangelo. Other late nineteenth-century sculptors, like Bourdelle, incorporated the power and subtlety of early Greek art into their own work but did not try to actually reproduce the early works.

Cupid and Psyche, bronze with marble base, ca. 1870. Albert Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, French, 1824-1887. Given in memory of Milton S. Fox by Mrs. Milton S. Fox and family, 74.82.

The Thinker, bronze, ca. 1883. Auguste Rodin, French, 1840-1917. Gift of Alexander P. Rosenberg, 79.138.

The twentieth century brought new concepts to sculpture. Classicism was downplayed in favor of abstract forms, new materials, and an interest in technological developments. Nevertheless, evidence of Classicism persists in the modern world. The sculptures on several buildings in downtown Cleveland–among them, the Cuyahoga County Court House and the Ameritrust Corporation (formerly Cleveland Trust) Building–demonstrate this point.

Heracles the Archer, bronze. Emile Antoine Bourdelle, French, 1861-1929. Gift of Mrs. Ralph King, 39.62.

Pedimental figures sculpted by Karl Bitter, ca. 1909, on the Ameritrust building at East Ninth Street and Euclid Avenue. (Photograph by David M. Thum)